

2017-4

Searching for the Transcendent in the Work of Francis Stuart

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maher, E. (2017) Searching for the Transcendent in the Work of Francis Stuart in *Doctrine & Life*, Vol. 67, no. 4. April 2017. pp. 20-29

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business and Humanities at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@tudublin.ie, arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, brian.widdis@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)

Searching for the Transcendent in the Work of Francis Stuart

EAMON MAHER

FRANCIS STUART (1902-2000) has always been a controversial figure in Irish letters, mainly as a result of the radio broadcasts he gave during his stay in Nazi Germany, which are described in the highly autobiographical novel, *Black List Section H* (1971), and as a result of which certain commentators came to view him as an anti-Semite. That same novel also speaks openly about his problematic marriage to Iseult Gonne, his involvement in the Civil War, his sexual escapades and heavy drinking bouts in London and Paris, his anguished relationship with God. At no point is there any attempt made to present himself in a favourable light. If anything, he would appear to have been very harsh in his descriptions of his many failings as a husband, father and human being.

Throughout his long life, Stuart was embarked on a quest to find meaning in a world that had been ravaged by two world wars and the extermination of millions of innocents that accompanied them.¹ The aftereffects caused many to question how an all-loving and all-powerful God could have failed to intervene in such circumstances. His biographer Kevin Kiely encapsulates what constitutes one of Stuart's main concerns:

He was very cautious when discussing mysticism. However, it was

-
1. The French Algerian writer Albert Camus, a contemporary of Stuart's, shared some of the same concerns: 'The insurmountable obstacle appears to me to be the problem of evil. There is the death of innocents which signifies the arbitrariness of the divine, but there is also the murder of infants which embodies human arbitrariness.' 'Trois Interviews', in *Albert Camus Oeuvres Complètes II 1944-1948* (Paris: Gallimard/Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2006), 476.

one of the subjects which cemented our friendship. I was desperately seeking for certainty and stability for whatever inner chaos was my lot at the time. To my great relief Stuart discussed matters instinctively and understood people in terms of how they coped with 'inner disturbance and turmoil.'²

WRITING FROM LIFE

Stuart's own life definitely had more than its fair share of 'turmoil', which possibly explains how consistently he explores such dilemmas in his writing. A convert to Catholicism at the age of 17, there is a sense in which Stuart never really conformed to the role of subservient underling to the absolute power of priests that was commonplace in post-Independence Ireland. His mind was too sharp not to question dogmas and rules about which he harboured doubts. He found Iseult's nationalism, which was strongly bound up with her Catholic faith, hard to take, on occasions. Being the daughter of Maud Gonne and the step-daughter of Seán McBride, Iseult could not blithely question her family's absolute commitment to the nationalist cause. Stuart was considerably younger than Iseult and their relationship was not an easy one. Problems with sex were a constant concern. We read in *Section H*: 'Undoing stockings was the start of things he didn't dare think of, at least in connection with her. How could he try to leap across the gulf between his body and hers without final disaster?'³

Lest people think that such a reading risks confusing fiction and reality, this is how Stuart described the creative process: 'I am one of those writers who identify themselves closely with their fiction. This has a bearing on the fact that it has been at the start of a creative phase that I have written at my best; it has been out of a pressure of stored living and experiencing.'⁴

2. Kevin Kiely, *Francis Stuart: Artist and Outcast* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2007), 6.

3. Francis Stuart, *Black List Section H* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 21. All subsequent references to this text will be designated by in-text citations in brackets using the abbreviation *BL*, followed by the page number.

4. Cited by Kiely, *Francis Stuart*, 228.

He was even more explicit about the autobiographical nature of his writing, according to his biographer: 'He [Stuart] felt that imagined plots, circumstances and the intervention of major characters made for bad fiction.'⁵ The idea of fiction being born out of the pressure cooker of 'stored living and experiencing' is very apposite and it is certainly that quality which attracts readers to Stuart's work.

While his subjects are often far from uplifting, one has the impression that the emotion of the author has been distilled over the course of time in such a way as to demonstrate what Seamus Heaney described as the sound of a real hammer on a real anvil. Good poetry should have the same quality according to the Nobel laureate: 'a ring of truth in the medium, the sounding out of inner workings, the sense of being in the presence of a self-absorbed and undistracted endeavour.'⁶

When Stuart speaks about the difficulties that developed between himself and his wife, the pain is palpable, the tension caused by not knowing how to deal with the gap that was steadily growing between them:

But inches were miles in the tricky geography of the body, where tenderness and loving trust would have guided him to the healing entrance, anguished desire, combined with Iseult's passivity in the face of his unhappy fumbings, prevented him. He remained terrified of remaining outside with his hurt, unadmitted to the ravished sanctuary. (*BL*, 27)

Very few writers of his generation deal with sexuality in such an open manner. Stuart's frankness would have undoubtedly caused upset to his children, but that did not apparently deter him in his quest for truth.

This article will explore what was at the core of Stuart's life and art: the unending search for the transcendent. It will concentrate on two novels, the aforementioned *Black List Section H* and an earlier novel, *The*

5. Kiely, *Francis Stuart*, 12.

6. Seamus Heaney, 'Introduction', in John McDonagh and Stephen Newman (eds), *Re-membering Michael Hartnett* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 11.

Pillar of Cloud (1948), which demonstrates many of the same preoccupations as Heinrich Böll's *The Silent Angel* (1994), also based in post-war Germany and not published until after the writer's death.

THE PILLAR OF CLOUD

The Pillar of Cloud is a less obviously autobiographical novel than *Black List*, but the similarities to what Stuart went through at the end of the second World War in Germany are nevertheless clear to anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the writer's life. Dominic Malone, a budding writer, headed to Germany prior to the outbreak of war and is completely transformed by what happens to him during his stay there.

His encounter with the sisters Halka and Lisette in a strange way opens the path to salvation for this young Irishman. He loves Halka, but must marry Lisette as a means of helping this dying woman to escape with him to Ireland – she dies before this can happen. Halka says to him: 'If you save Lisette for my sake, then you will have saved me, too. When I see that miracle, then I will believe again and I will begin to live again.'⁷

It is noticeable how prominent the notion of sacrifice is in this novel. Dominic and Halka, while harbouring many doubts about God and religion, still hold on to an unquenchable faith in the importance of putting others ahead of self, of giving up hope on happiness in this world in order to achieve something more valuable than human pleasure: namely, meaning.

Halka shares with Dominic some of her doubts: 'I don't believe in the mercy of God. Perhaps I have lived too long in places into which the mercy of God did not penetrate.' (PC, 85); 'I only believe in one miracle – the miracle of pain. Because it is a miracle that the heart can bear what it is given to bear. And when it can't bear it any more, it is a miracle, too, to have a way to escape.' (PC, 105) Having known the pain of unspeakable torture and abuse, having had her body used like it was merely a piece of meat, having lost all sense of dignity, Halka is determined that only by

7. Francis Stuart, *The Pillar of Cloud* (Dublin: New Island, 1994), 191. All subsequent references will be designated by the abbreviation PC, followed by page number.

giving Dominic to Lisette can she be deemed worthy of him. Dominic too has known dark moments, even though on a much less severe level than Halka. He is forced to spend time in an underground cell during his interrogation by a French army captain called Renier. He reflects that his incarceration is merely part of a larger existential crisis:

There was a whole world of cells and dungeons, cold and damp and bare, a dim and silent nether region whose shades had been creeping over the world of the living in the last frightful years. (PC, 43)

In the same way that living with constant hunger helps people to understand what life is really about, being imprisoned can offer special insights with regard to the human condition. Thanks to his experiences in Germany, Dominic is no longer the callow youth who left Ireland a few years previously. His Uncle Egan finds it hard to understand how he could have married Lisette and he is uncomfortable when exposed to the *ménage à trois* of which Dominic is now a part. That is because the uncle has lived in a world sheltered from the hardship and horror of war. He has not had his belief system turned on its head, or been forced to see the atrocities people are capable of in certain situations. Dominic, for his part, has found a literary vocation in the physical and existential rubble that is post-war Europe:

His poetry must be holy. There can be no speaking of what is holy except in words that are holy. That is why the sermons that he sometimes heard in the Cathedral were meaningless. The priests spoke of God, but their words were the words of those submerged in the world. He often thought to himself: Substitute for the words 'God' or 'Jesus Christ' in their sermons, the words 'Fatherland' or 'social justice' or even 'a successful trading year' and you might be listening to a politician or a company director at a board meeting. (PC, 161-162)

This is not the type of religion that can have any meaning for Domi-

nic, a religion rooted in this world. He has more lofty ideals than those offered to him by Catholicism, as he explains to the French soldier Descoux:

The respectable, the 'good' Catholics and most of the priests form a moral band, and woe to any helpless being who gets a baby or a doctor or lawyer in some small town who is touched by the breath of scandal, as they call it.' (PC, 178)

He adds that it made very little difference whether a person fell into the hands of men or God: 'in both cases you were persecuted and tormented. There was no escaping the *bourreaux*. There was the chief executioner, God, and men who were made in His image.' (PC, 180) It is through realising a disinterested and selfless relationship with Halka and Lisette that Dominic comes to know peace. On one occasion, with Lisette asleep on the couch beside him, he experiences happiness:

It was her innocence before which he was humbled and through which he was purified and redeemed. [...] All that he had suffered had been the beginning of his redemption of heart, but Lisette had been its consummation. (PC, 198)

Reading lines like these, one is tempted to wonder the extent to which Stuart adhered to any formal set of religious dogmas or principles. His quest was definitely a transcendent one, but he did not demonstrate any prescribed or set theology.

Discussing *The Pillar of Cloud*, Kevin Kiely makes the interesting point that Stuart was in no way a rigid moralist, and concludes: 'The novel exemplifies his concern with the dissenting and neutral artist's need to be an outcast and the artist's imperative to make art, no matter what has happened in life.'⁸ I might add that the art emerges precisely from 'what did in fact happen in life.'

Belief was important to Stuart, but it did not necessarily have to be belief in a religious system. He saw his writing as a type of parable, a

8. Kiely, *Francis Stuart*, 191.

form of prophecy. Towards the end of *The Pillar of Cloud*, we come across these interesting lines:

If you went on praying long enough until the prayer became perfect, then he knew it had that power. But this 'perfect' prayer, what was it, really? It was almost no prayer at all. It was a detached prayer – a prayer in which you saw that what happened was good, and it was not a prayer for the shaping of events so much as for the understanding of them. (PC, 207-208)

BLACK LIST SECTION H

If you substitute 'writing' for 'prayer' in these lines, you have a good description of Stuart's aesthetic approach. Because writing was his way of making sense of the strange world in which we live, of shining a light on those areas of life that many would prefer to keep enveloped in darkness.

The searing honesty with which he shared some dark facts about his life, means that one regularly feels uncomfortable when reading Stuart's prose. Take the following admission that H makes to his fellow Republican prisoner Lane in *Black List Section H*:

What most people here respect, such as religion, literature, or literature, I either despise, or if at first I do seem to share some of their beliefs, like about poetry or the Republican cause in the civil war, it soon turns out that it's for quite different reasons and that we're even further apart than had we disagreed from the start. (BL, 87)

Like his character, Stuart seems to have been the eternal outcast, a classic misfit, and it may well have been his marginality that allowed him to write in the way that he did. If personality is style, then Stuart's style betrays an uneasiness with others because of his inability to pretend, or lie. His approach was direct and to the point. He stated his opinions without concern for what reaction they would evoke.

Stuart knew that he was a man of extremes, a trait that was pointed

out to him on one occasion by Iseult: 'Whatever you don't react against violently, you come under the spell of. There's nothing between, no detachment, no balance, no perspective.' (BL, 114) This may explain his obsession with the Gospels and the mystics, which he took to reading with great interest during a certain period of his life.

After experiencing an awareness 'of being alone in the haunted room of my mind', he admitted in Confession that this made him identify with the suffering Christ: 'That's why the promise of Jesus to come and dwell with those who love Him has always had such an appeal. It fascinated me for a time and I made a study of the mystics to find out if the promise had ever actually been kept.' (BL, 211) He explains to the priest: 'What I need, Father, isn't the Christ at present preached by the Church but intimations of a spirit more (at least imaginatively and potentially) perverse than myself, one that has had the experiences I can only guess and tremble at, who bears not only the signs of the stigmata but of the most terrible traumata as well.' (BL, 211-212)

It would have been interesting to know what the reaction of the priest was to such a declaration! Stuart was a tortured soul who was conscious of the damage he was causing himself and others through the extreme nature of his character. While he could have moments of mystical revelation, he was also prone to descending into a shady world of sin and depravity. Stuart's alter ego H is thus portrayed as being a broken vessel, a lowly man with little to recommend him apart from the gift of writing. It may have been this fact that led Richard Murphy to conclude:

Stuart invites moral condemnation as proof against his domestication into an Irish literary culture in which opposition to illiberal, anti-individualist Ireland has become a posture of the establishment.⁹

Indeed, his outsider status was inevitable in the sterile conformism and narrow provincialism which dominated life in the Ireland of his

9. Richard T. Murphy, 'A Minority of One: Francis Stuart's *Back List Section H* and the end of the Irish *Bildungsroman*', in *Irish University Review*, 34 (2) (2004), 261-76, 267.

youth and which is well-captured in these lines from *Black List*:

The story afforded H another depressing glimpse into the kind of religiosity which many of these people seemed to find all they needed in the way of an image of God. It struck him that their central pulses, whose vibrancy determines the depth of men's responses, had a mechanical tick. Set to a parochial clock, they went tick-tock, piously recording the do's and don'ts for each day of the week, while around the cosmos the lingering echo of the original upheaval was merging with the first rumblings of the final bang. (BL, 124)

Travel allowed Stuart to escape from such a stifling environment and to live in a world where people had formed a completely different view of religion than that which continued to prevail in Ireland because of its lack of involvement in the cataclysmic events of World War II. The last lines of *Black List*, H reflects on 'the deep divide between the past and what was still to come', and concludes

Whatever it was that was at the other end there was no way of telling. It might be a howl of final despair or the profound silence that might be broken by certain words that he didn't yet know how to listen for. (BL, 352)

WHAT LIES BEHIND APPEARANCES

The lines are not bereft of hope, the 'howl of final despair' being attenuated by the possibility of words that could in time bring comfort and meaning. Stuart's art, his constant seeking after what lies behind appearances, his commitment to selfless love and refusal to judge the actions of others, all endow him with a spiritual quality that transcends traditional religion. His is a religion that wonders constantly if there is a God at all, or if He is an invention of humanity to help us to put up with the unbearable agony of existence. The quest for the transcendent involves questioning and reservations; it means never standing still or being comfortable in one's beliefs; it demands an acceptance that in the

end no one knows for sure what awaits us in eternity. The following lines from *The Pillar of Cloud* capture Stuart's dilemma succinctly:

All that complacency and mediocrity! Even Christ they had made
complacent on His Cross – a smug little crucified God secure on
His Cross! 'I am on my Cross, and all's right with the world!' All
the blood and tears it was taking to make the Cross a real Cross
again, and he did not know if it ever would be done. He did not
know. (PC, 196)

Stuart is one of those writers who can cope with that uncertainty while remaining committed to an inner life that yields joy and despair in equal measure.

.....

AMON MAHER'S most recent collection of essays, *Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and Beyond*, which he co-edited with Eugene O'Brien, is now available from Manchester University Press.

Serving the common good – Our hope is for a Church and a society which, while rejecting abortion, reaches out to women who have had an abortion, with a listening ear and an understanding heart. Most of all, we believe that the common good is best served by a Church and a civil society which, while rejecting abortion, continues to offer women real alternatives and real support.

Irish Bishops' Conference, Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution